‘Human dignity has no passport’: visits Gran Canaria

by Gerard O’Connell June 11, 2026

Pope Leo XIV makes a floral offering to migrants lost at sea at the dock of the Port of Arguineguin in Gran
June 6-12 apostolic journey to Spain. Credit: OSV News photo/Borja Suarez, Reuters

“We cannot grow accustomed to counting the dead. Human dignity has no passport and does not lose its value when crossing a border,” Pope Leo XIV declared in a major speech on migration that was addressed not only to the local audience but also to an international one. He spoke soon after arriving on Gran Canaria, on June 11, the sixth day of his visit to Spain.

He came here to express in a public way his profound concern at the plight of migrants, many of whom have drowned at sea, and to

appeal to the conscience of “those in positions of responsibility” to respond to what is considered the greatest humanitarian crisis of the 21st century. The Canary Islands is a Spanish archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean with seven main islands off the coast of northwestern Africa. Gran Canaria is the third largest of the islands.

The influx of migrants to these islands from West Africa began in 2020, at the time of Covid-19. The flow increased in the following years as migrants sought to reach the European mainland, as they do at Lampedusa and Lesbos, where Pope Francis went to highlight the problem and denounce “the globalization of indifference.”

A total of 47,000 migrants arrived at the Canary Islands in 2024, but the numbers decreased significantly in 2025—some say by 60 percent—because of border control efforts by the European Union and Spain and the provision of funds to West African governments to prevent them leaving. Still, the situation remains dire and unpredictable. According to Caritas, migrants account for 24 percent of the 2.27 million people living on these islands, and 25.5 percent of the total population live in structural poverty and social exclusion, the majority of them migrants.

Pope Francis had wanted to come to the Canary Islands to draw international attention to this dramatic situation, but his health did not permit this. Leo, his successor, has taken up the cause with determination, not only with his words but also with his gestures.

Upon arrival this morning, Leo drove straight to the small port of Arguineguín, a fishing village in the southwest coast of the island, where a large crowd awaited him under a blazing sun, among them members of organizations working with migrants, and some 1,000 migrants from Latin America and Africa.

The local bishop, José Mazuelos Pérez, in his welcome speech, told the pope that many have called this place “the port of shame,”

because so many thousands of people fleeing hunger, war, and despair arrived here.

Bishop Pérez told him “men, women, and children following the so-called Atlantic Route—one of the most dangerous in the world—have arrived on cayucos and pateras [wooden boats and makeshift vessels], primarily from Senegal, Mauritania, Gambia, Mali, and Morocco, undertaking crossings that can exceed 1,600 kilometers [almost 1000 miles].” He said: “The conditions of the journey, the precariousness of the vessels, and the absence of rescue resources on the open sea result in a high number of casualties, many of whom remain unknown. Risking everything, they are simply trying to live with dignity.”

The bishop concluded: “Migration reveals deep wounds in the contemporary world—inequality, violence, poverty, lack of opportunity—but it also opens new paths of encounter, solidarity, and fraternity.” He told Leo: “Your presence here, Holy Father, is not a mere gesture. It is a light.”

Four persons gave testimonies after the bishop. Tito Villarmea, the captain of Salvamento Marítimo, a rescue operation, said over the years they rescued more than 20,000 people. Next came María Reyes Alemán Cruz, a Caritas volunteer, who recalled that when the migrants started arriving “we felt powerless: resources were scarce, we didn’t speak their language, and, very often, all we could offer them were cookies, milk, and a little assistance.” Over time they discovered “what it meant to walk together: coordinating our efforts, sharing what little we had, and offering support in simplicity and fragility. We learned that it wasn’t about solving everything, but about being present.”

Pope Leo XIV listens as Tito Villarmea, captain of Guardamar Urania rescue boat, during a meeting with organizations working with migrants at the Port of Arguineguin, during the pope’s visit to the island of Gran Canaria, Spain, June 11, 2026. Credit: OSV News photo/Borja Suarez, Reuters

A third, deeply moving testimony came from a Nigerian woman called Blessing who became a victim of trafficking for sexual exploitation. (For security reasons her testimony was read by another woman.) “I did not leave my country because I wanted to. I left because I had no other choice. Getting food was almost impossible. At 14, I was already on my own, trying to figure out how to move forward,” the statement said. Seeking to get to Europe, she was forced into prostitution, but thanks to help from the local church she is now free.

The last testimony came from a Latin American woman, María Fernanda López Meza, who arrived here in her early 20s with nothing except “a case full of dreams,” and step by step, moving from one job to another, she has her own decorating business today.

After listening to the testimonies Pope Leo, who has first hand experience of responding to migrants from Venezuela as a bishop in Peru, delivered what is perhaps his strongest speech on migration to date.

He said the Gospel of Matthew (c.24:41-45) “contains a warning that no believer can take lightly.” Here by the sea where “so many wounded lives arrive, stripped of almost everything, but never of their dignity,” he said, the Gospel “pulls us out of our comfortable position as spectators and places before us a brother or a sister who has arrived. It asks us if we have recognized Christ in those who disembark, marked by fear, hunger and violence, after enduring the

desert, the night and the sea.”

Holding up his hand, he said, “I am wearing the Fisherman’s Ring” that recalls when Jesus called Peter, and told him: “From now on you will be catching people” (Lk 5:10).

“On this island,” he continued, “Christ’s command is especially powerful and painful. This island, small in size but great in humanity, has witnessed the arrival of thousands of people, torn from their homelands and entrusted to the fragility of a boat. Here, people are rescued from the sea and lifeless bodies are recovered from the waters. For this reason, the Successor of Peter cannot ignore these docks.”

“The sea can symbolize danger, darkness and chaos,” he remarked, “even today, monsters lurk in these seas: mafias that profit from despair, traffickers who enslave women and children, and those whose indifference allows the poor to be swallowed up by exploitation or forgetfulness.”

However, he reminded his audience that “faith is not paralyzed by the power of the sea. We believe in a God who subdues chaos, limits evil and opens up paths where death seems to prevail. We see this in Christ, who walked on water and, in the face of the storm, uttered a decisive phrase: ‘Peace! Be still!’”

He thanked those who gave testimonies and all those participating in rescue missions, in welcoming and in accompanying others, “bearing witness that concrete mercy can save and change lives.”

He thanked Blessing for her testimony and commenting on her name said, “it reminds us that every human life is a blessing from God. No one can buy, sell, use or discard it, because the image and likeness of the Creator shines forth in every person.”

Then hitting out against human trafficking and the exploitation of women, Pope Leo told Blessing and women who like her become victims: “If others have put a price on your body, know that God has never ceased to recognize your inestimable worth. If others want to trap you in a painful past, God continues to make a promise for your future. If others treat you like an object, the church wants to tell you today that you are a daughter and a sister…We want to walk with you until that truth feels stronger than the pain.”

Addressing the migrants present, the Augustinian pope said, “I want to bow before your dignity. You are not just numbers or files. You are people who have left behind families and homes. You have dreams that no one has the right to despise.

“Your lives must be protected. Do not surrender your lives to those who trade with them. Do not believe those who promise easy paradises in exchange for your body, your money, your silence or your freedom. Those false promises are ‘siren songs’; they are industries of death.”

The American pope emphasized that this “tragedy” of migration is a “call to conscience” of the nations and the international community. It appeals first of all to “the conscience of the nations of origin of the migrants” that “must establish conditions for peace, justice and development” so people don’t have to emigrate. It next appeals to “the conscience of the transit nations” that are called “to protect the vulnerable and not leave them in the hands of criminal networks.” It also appeals to “the conscience of Europe,” which “cannot claim to uphold human dignity while growing accustomed to the Mediterranean and the Atlantic becoming unmarked graves.” Lastly, it is an appeal to “the conscience of the international community,” which is called to effective and persevering cooperation.

Moreover, Pope Leo said the tragedy is a challenge to the church as a whole and insisted that, “welcoming migrants cannot be a secondary matter that is left to a few volunteers.” Indeed, he said “every boat that arrives brings a question along with the migrants: What kind of world have we built, if so many brothers and sisters must risk death to seek life?”

Less there was any doubt what he was asking for, Leo spelled it out. He said: “Human dignity demands legal and safe pathways, rescue and assistance, real cooperation against traffickers, effective protection for victims, serious processes of reception and integration, and policies that allow every person to live with dignity in their own land.”

He underlined that “while there is a right to seek refuge when life is threatened, there is also the right not to have to migrate: the right to remain in one’s own home without hunger, war, persecution, violence, the land becoming uninhabitable, corruption stealing the bread from the poor or weapons destroying the future of children.”

Then, in striking words, Leo insisted, “We cannot grow accustomed to counting the dead. Human dignity has no passport and does not lose its value when crossing a border.”

He prayed, “May the God who, in the evening of life, will judge us on our love grant us the grace to recognize him today in the poor and in foreigners, and free us from viewing the suffering of others as if it did not concern us.”

He prayed that Our Lady of Mount Carmel—the patroness of fishermen—“may accompany those who have arrived, console those who have lost their loved ones, sustain those who welcome them and awaken the courage of mercy in all of us.”

He concluded with these words: “May history not accuse us of turning the pain of those who suffer into a common sight along our

shores. Today, here by the sea, every individual that arrives asks us what remains of our humanity. Sooner or later, it will be known whether we protected life or whether we yielded to indifference.”

The crowd applauded and cheered, but then fell into silence for a minute when he cast a floral wreath into the sea in memory of those who lost their lives on the Atlantic route to Europe. Leo next prayed in front of the statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and blessed a cross made from the wood of a boat carrying migrants that failed to make the shore, and afterward shook hands with many of the migrants present.

From the port, he went to the cathedral of St. Anne, where he was given another enthusiastic welcome by the bishops, clergy, religious and pastoral workers. He encouraged them “to continue offering to everyone the love that you, in turn, have received from the Lord—a love that becomes nourishment through hospitality, listening, closeness and care for the most vulnerable.”

That evening, he drove to the Gran Canaria football stadium to celebrate Mass for some 40,000 islanders. Tomorrow, he will conclude his weeklong visit to Spain by visiting Tenerife, the largest of the Canary Islands, where he will meet French-speaking migrants, before taking the plane back to Rome. On route, he will hold a press conference.